

The *EDITOR'S* desk

Letting Go of the Past: An Important Part of Life...

By Lorraine Leslie

In 1993 I went back to school and completed a 3-year course in 18 months and received my certificate, with honours, in Working With The Aged - Multidiscipline from Sheridan College.

I was 42 years old at the time, going through a divorce and thought my world was falling apart.

One of the requirements in completing the course was to do an internship with someone who was confined to a nursing home. The objective of my assignment was to work with a patient who was a recluse and to help that person validate life itself. For the purpose of confidentiality I will refer to this person as Bill.

Having many of my own troubles, I questioned how I was to communicate with Bill, and more so "how was I to enrich his life? Having been taught to complete whatever I set out to accomplish, I set forth to complete my task.

The first day I met Bill I explained what we would be doing over the next ten weeks. He granted permission for me to inquire about his past and for us to go out into the community. For three hours, once a week, we talked and visited places of interest around the community that Bill had no idea existed. We also shared ideas about the meaning of the term "quality of life".

My friend had very low self esteem ... he had been isolated for years living on a farm and attending to parental needs. This wonderful, unique person experienced a shyness that I found overwhelming. How could I help?

I discovered that sitting in a quiet room with no disturbances helped Bill to relax and enabled us to communicate better. The most important thing I had to do was gain his trust and to sincerely show Bill that I truly cared. I learned to listen to every word carefully. I made sure that we were at an eye-to-eye level with each other and that there was adequate space between us to prevent invading each other's space.

For the first two weeks we walked and talked about his childhood. The third week we took a drive around town where I pointed out things of interest. The next week found us visiting a farm to see if Bill was comfortable with his past, and in the fifth week we started to discuss how he could become involved with the other patients and in turn maybe help them. An on-site

gardening project filled our sixth week together, and by the seventh week Bill had progressed to the point of joining in social activities with myself and some of the other residents.

With two more weeks to go I asked if we might go out to a public restaurant... and to my delight my friend agreed. On the ninth week we went for a drive to a shopping mall to experience being comfortable in large unfamiliar surroundings. Finally, on our tenth visit we went out for afternoon tea in a quiet little restaurant.

During this period of time Bill experienced many new and exciting things and began to feel more comfortable talking to others in the nursing home and participating in some social activities. At the end of the tenth visit I had to say good-bye and explain that I would not be coming back. Independence and closure was part of the process. I saw Bill evolve into someone with confidence who learned to care for and show consideration for others.

How did this happen? What role did I play? I validated the past and brought my friend into the present.

We learned together that letting go of the past is an important part of life and to give of yourself to others is an important part of living. Learning to accept oneself and others for who they are gives us "quality of life".

Recently, I asked someone who works at the nursing home if my friend was still there. The reply was "Yes... and is doing just fine." After ten years Bill continues to participate in a number of activities ... his communication skills have greatly improved.

I will never forget the lesson I learned from this experience. You see, I also had low self-esteem at the time and together we reached inside and brought forth a positive attitude that has made us who we are today. Thank you my friend, I will remember you always...

The feature women about whom I write, have traveled a long, winding road to success – each woman on her own journey; a journey that sometimes hasn't been smooth. These women open their hearts to inspire and motivate other women, of all ages, to follow their dreams and passions.